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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in the critical areas of concern and further action and initiatives: participation and access of women to the media, and information and communication technologies and their impact on and use as an instrument of the advancement and empowerment of women

Statement submitted by Radin Institute for Family Health Education and Promotion, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 25 July 1996.

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The advancement and empowerment of women: challenge for women's health in the media and information and communication technologies

The goal of the present statement is to address how girls and women are portrayed by the collective media — television, movies, advertising, newspapers and magazines — and how this depiction affects their health. While emphasizing what has been considered in the Beijing+5 initiative and the Millennium Declaration goals, we believe that perspectives about women's advancement and empowerment need to be efficiently integrated in the working agenda of the World Summit on the Information Society, to be held in Geneva in 2003, and the United Nations Information and Communication Technologies Task Force.

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Women look to the media as primary sources of health information. Research also shows that girls and women are influenced by the way females are portrayed by the media. Health and education are the most critical areas of concern in the advancement and empowerment of women. To strengthen preventive programmes that promote women's health, the importance of an educational approach to changing unhealthy behaviours must be emphasized. Information and communication technologies and the media can provide a valuable context for this purpose and must be considered as broad-based vehicles for conducting culturally competent public health education programmes. When empowered and involved, women and mothers, as primary caregivers in almost all cultures can be effective partners in health education programmes through the media and information and communication technologies.

The application of information and communication technologies as a tool for the effective encouragement and establishment of healthy behaviours covers the entire spectrum of women's lives from early childhood development through adolescence and the reproductive years. In this regard, access to information and communication technologies, capabilities and capacities in using information and communication technologies as an educational device and appropriate policy measures to create an enabling environment for using information and communication technologies must be addressed as potential obstacles. We need to provide greater clarity in defining these problems and challenges from a gender perspective.

There is a need to provide women's groups with the skills to access the news media, frame health problems in a social context and advance a healthy public policy. This means understanding how news, entertainment, and advertising present health and social issues. The issue of women's health news confusion has become so intertwined with health news. Two major causes of death in women (heart disease and cancer) should be those that media coverage clarifies, not clouds. Women's health initiatives should be prioritized in all phases of production in media, beginning with programme planning.

The message of violence and health deterioration through the media and information and communication technologies could be a potential threat to the Millennium Declaration's specific goals of empowerment and advancement of women. It is necessary to substitute this with the message of tolerance and health promotion and the active involvement and partnership of media and information and communication technology institutions, Governments and civil society. Action must be taken to bring together two powerful industries — health and the media — to increase the understanding and relationship between them. It is critical that leaders of these industries begin exploring the current images of women in the media and work together to bring attention to this problem. To establish a women's health promotion approach in the media and information and communication technologies, Governments and private sectors need to make a comprehensive decision based upon a deep understanding of the Millennium Declaration goals.

The advancement and empowerment of women demands a challenge for distributing health promotion values through the media and information and communication technology vehicles.